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ABSTRACT

A study examined secondary teachers' present knowledge of the reading skills needed by their students. Subjects, 76 teachers of 15 different high school subjects, were asked (1) what specific reading skills they considered most necessary for their students to be able to read subject area materials, (2) what reading skills their students are best able to apply to subject area materials, and (3) in which reading skills their students are most deficient. In addition, the teachers were questioned about their instruction in the teaching of reading and the availability of reading instruction at their schools. Responses to the survey showed that the teachers believed comprehension was the reading skill most necessary for their students to succeed in their courses, and it was also the skill in which the students were the most deficient. The next skill was vocabulary and the third was word analysis. Therefore, it would appear that the reading skills most needed by the students are those in which they are the most deficient. It is also worth noting that most of the teachers had little formal training in the teaching of reading skills. (The questionnaire, tables of findings, and a short bibliography are included.) (EL)

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HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' AWARENESS OF READING SKILLS (A PILOT STUDY)

A
Presentation
to the
NORTH CENTRAL READING ASSOCIATION
Twenty-Eighth Annual Conference

by

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October 19, 1985

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HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' AWARENESS OF READING SKILLS (A PILOT STUDY)

Reading to obtain meaning from print material is a process by which learners of all ages gain knowledge/information and it is something to enjoy as a leisure-time activity (Forgan and Mangrum, 1981). Moreover, the ability of individuals to read has been and remains an important part of their own well-being and the society in which they live (Stanchfield, 1965; Greenlaw and Moore, 1982). Yet reading is a long-term development process that cannot be mastered at a specific age/grade level or date (Early, 1973). It must be taught, learned, and nurtured continuously throughout all educational levels, grades 1-12 (Vacca, 1981).

Introduction. Far too many individuals in our society do not like to read (Lehr, 1981). Once students leave high school, they rarely read to gain information or read as a leisure time activity (Shepherd, 1982). Many learners, especially in secondary schools, do not read to gain an adequate knowledge of their subjects and their classroom performance remains uninspired at best. They are the ones who suffer the consequences, yet are largely unaware of what they are missing (Roe, et.al., 1983). Moreover, they are graduating from high school, entering society and are expected to contribute to it, but these individuals are underprepared for that responsibility. The situation is critical and needs to be corrected (Siedow, et.al., 1985).

The reasons for poor student reading/classroom performance are better known now than they were a few years ago. In general, they focus on (1) changes in the style of reading material from elementary school narrative to high school expository prose and (2) teachers' failure to teach the reading skills appropriate to their subject(s) (Criscuolo, 1982). Moreover, the reading process as taught in the elementary grades has tended to be a boring, workbook oriented chore (Greenlaw and Moore, 1982) that has caused students to dislike and turn away from reading (O'Rourke, 1980). Reading skill instruction in high schools was largely non-existent and, at best, sporatic (Vacca, 1981).

Fortunately, for secondary students and society, the reading instructional scene is changing. In many states, teachers are required to take a reading methods course for certification. Also, throughout the country, there is a new emphasis on the high school teacher's responsibility for improving reading instruction (Cushenbury, 1982). But legislation and élan have their limitations. Making it mandatory to take a reading methods class and realizing that it is necessary to teach reading skills in secondary subjects are no guarantees that such skills will be taught (Siedow, et.al., 1985). So an interim step is necessary and that is to determine secondary teachers' present knowledge of the reading skills needed by their students. This information can provide direction for appropriate inservice programs as well as changed classroom practices that lead to improved student reading and learning (Braam and Walker, 1973).

Review of Related Literature. The literature relating to this special topic is sparse and dated. Much of it focuses on elementary

teachers and what little there is at the secondary level concerns itself with teacher evaluation of reading skills already described for them. The initial study (Braam and Roehm, 1964) concluded that the high school teachers sampled were largely unaware of the reading skills needed by their students. In a later replication (Braam and Walker, 1973) similar conclusions were drawn and it was noted that the high school reading specialists were more aware of reading skills than were the content teachers.

In general, secondary research studies tend to focus on emphasizing reading awareness among high school teachers (Criscuolo, 1982) and inservice programs that are designed to explain the reading techniques teachers can use (Criscuolo, et.al., 1980). Other areas of emphasis are on secondary remedial reading programs (Lehr, 1981) and special reading programs (Cushenbery, 1982).

One recent study investigated the accuracy of content teachers' judgements about the reading abilities of secondary students and explored the relationship between the types of information that content teachers use for making their judgements. Participants included 31 English and 22 social studies teachers. The factors noted were oral reading, study skills, vocabulary knowledge, comprehension skills, and physical/attitudinal elements. No significant relationships were found between types of information and judgments of reading abilities (Frager, 1984). Moreover, teachers were not asked to note reading skills, but had them presented as criterion reference factors.

Stevens (1978) investigated the accuracy of teacher judgment by comparing 30 teachers' diagnoses of an eight-year-old student's reading

abilities to a criterion diagnosis developed by a group of four expert diagnosticians. An average of thirty percent of the individual teachers' diagnostic statements agreed with the criterion diagnosis. However, this was at the elementary level and the reading skills noted were at the beginning reading level where oral reading is stressed.

In their investigation of the role of reading instruction in secondary content classrooms, Smith and Feathers (1983) compared teacher stated goals/practices with student perception of those elements. Goals were stated broadly (... want students to love the subject) and no reading skills were listed. Interestingly enough, the students perceived their teachers wanting them to obtain the facts from reading assignments. (Obtaining facts is an important reading skill.)

The dearth of literature regarding the specific topic of the present proposal is significant because one can conclude that other researchers have not yet conducted and reported such studies. Moreover, discovering current teacher knowledge of reading skills is a step that follows attitudinal investigations so it would seem that the time has come for conducting such research. The information generated can be of great value. When teacher knowledge of reading skills is discovered, areas of insufficiency can be made known and corrected accordingly through inservice programs.

Design of the Study. Students enrolled in a graduate level secondary reading methods class comprised the sample population. The Braam and Walker Survey on the following page was administered immediately at the start of the first session. Sampling was carried

Secondary Teachers' Survey of Student Reading Skills *

Secondary teachers' opinions about their students' reading skills are of vital importance for those planning appropriate changes in undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs. Do not sign this questionnaire, but do respond as openly as you can. Your opinion as a secondary teacher is important.

What subject(s) do you teach?

1. Which specific reading skills do you consider as most necessary for your students in order for them to read the materials used in your subject area?

2. Which reading skills are your students best able to apply to the reading material in your subject area(s)?

3. Note the reading skills in which your students are most deficient.

For the following questions, please mark YES or NO as warranted:

A. Have you received instruction in the teaching of reading in your undergraduate college courses? YES - NO

B. Have you received such instruction in your graduate courses? YES - NO

C. Has such instruction been part of inservice training programs? YES - NO

D. Is there a reading program in your high school now? YES - NO

E. Is there a reading specialist in your high school? YES - NO

F. Is there a reading teacher in your high school? YES - NO

Comments: Please add observations and/or ideas that will help strengthen secondary education.

* This questionnaire was adapted from Leonard S. Braam and James E. Walker, "Subject Teachers' Awareness of Reading Skills," Journal of Reading, 16:608-611, May, 1973.

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out in the fall and winter semesters as well as the spring and summer sessions. This procedure generated seventy-six usable survey responses.

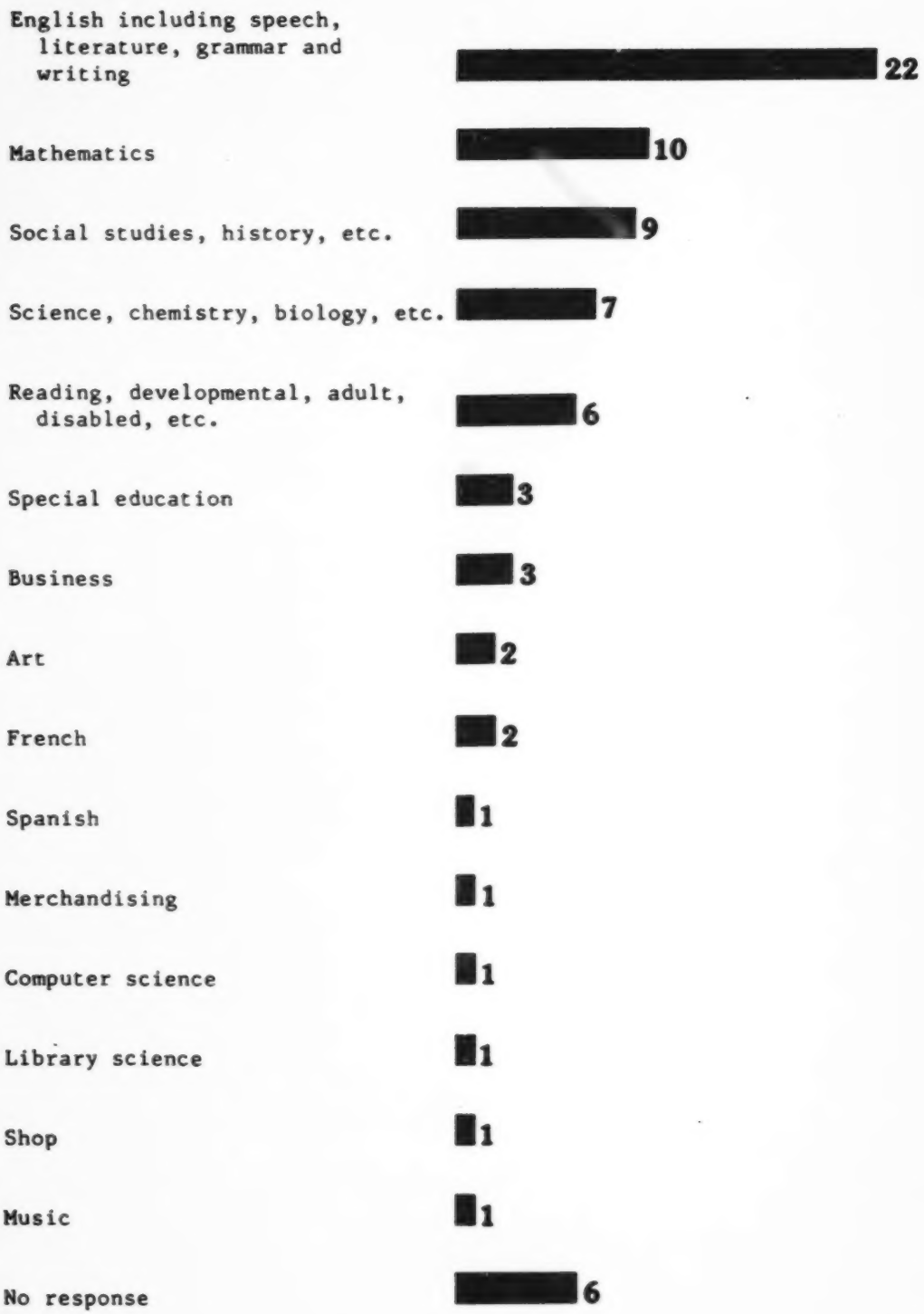
Graduate students were selected because of their experience and knowledge about teaching high school subjects. These teachers were in the best position to respond to the survey and to help determine if the instrument needed further refinement. Walker has noted that there was some difficulty in the interpretation of responses in their study (Braam and Walker, 1973). Should similar problems arise in the present study, this would indicate that the survey should be revamped accordingly. As it turned out, the instrument should be changed and revalidated.

These teachers represented a cross-section of the total teacher population in that they taught in all geographic/social locations, rural, urban, suburban. They are subject matter specialists, teaching in a wide variety of disciplines and have had at least several years of teaching experience. However, respondents were a "captive sample" and a select population because they are enrolled in the graduate class. Therefore, they were not selected at random and conclusions drawn from their responses must be interpreted accordingly.

Treatment of the Data and Findings. Responses were tabulated/recorded for each question on the survey. A start was made with the opening question, "What subject(s) do you teach?" Table 1 on the following page contains the frequency of responses from the participants. It will be noted that 22 teachers (29 per cent) were in the field of English (speech, drama, literature, grammar, writing, etc.).

TABLE I

Subjects Taught by Sample Population



There were ten mathematics teachers (13 per cent), nine social studies (history, geography, etc.) teachers (12 per cent), and so on.

For question 1, "What specific reading skills do you consider most necessary for your students in order for them to read the materials used in your subject area?" the responses are presented in Table 2. The skill of comprehension was the overwhelming first choice (57 per cent). Next in order was vocabulary knowledge (33 per cent) followed by word analysis skills (phonics, roots/affixes, etc.) at 25 per cent. Thereafter, specific reading skills are mentioned and it will be noted that most of them relate to comprehension.

Question 2 asked, "Which reading skills are your students best able to apply to the reading material in your subject area(s)?" These responses are presented in Table 3. It is of interest to note that 28 teachers (37 per cent) did not reply to this question. The reason may be that they simply do not know (this is what one teacher wrote). Thirteen teachers (15 per cent) believed that their students were able to read and comprehend as a best skill. Ten teachers (13 per cent) believed that vocabulary was the best skill and 9 teachers (12 per cent) wrote that reading for specific information was their students major strength.

In question 3, "Note the reading skills in which your students are most deficient," 31 teachers (41 per cent) wrote comprehension. These replies are presented in Table 4. Nineteen (25 per cent) wrote vocabulary and 15 (20 per cent) wrote word analysis skills. Moreover, 16 teachers (21 per cent) did not respond.

TABLE II

Reading skills Considered to be Most Necessary

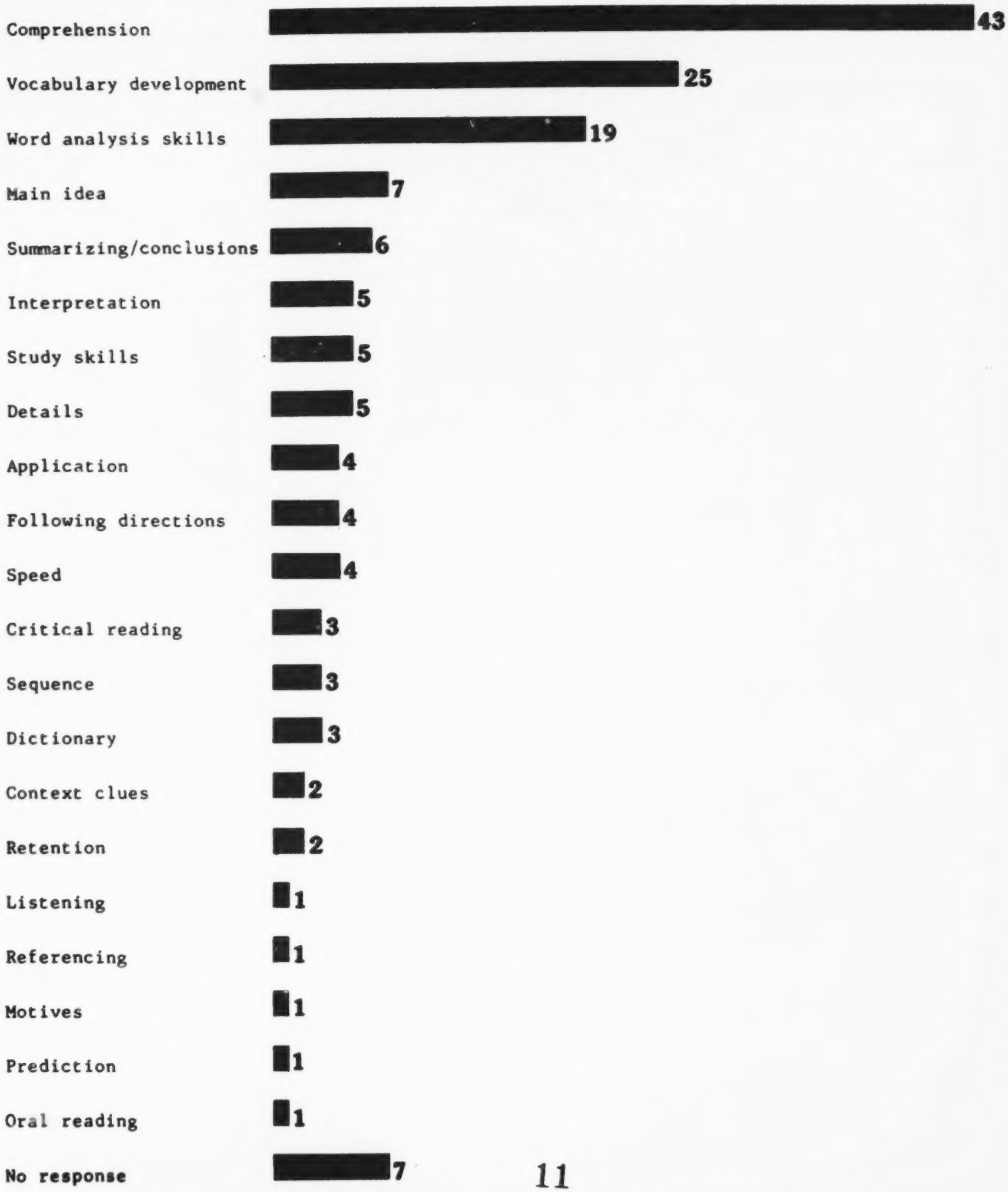


TABLE III

Skills Students are Best Able to Apply

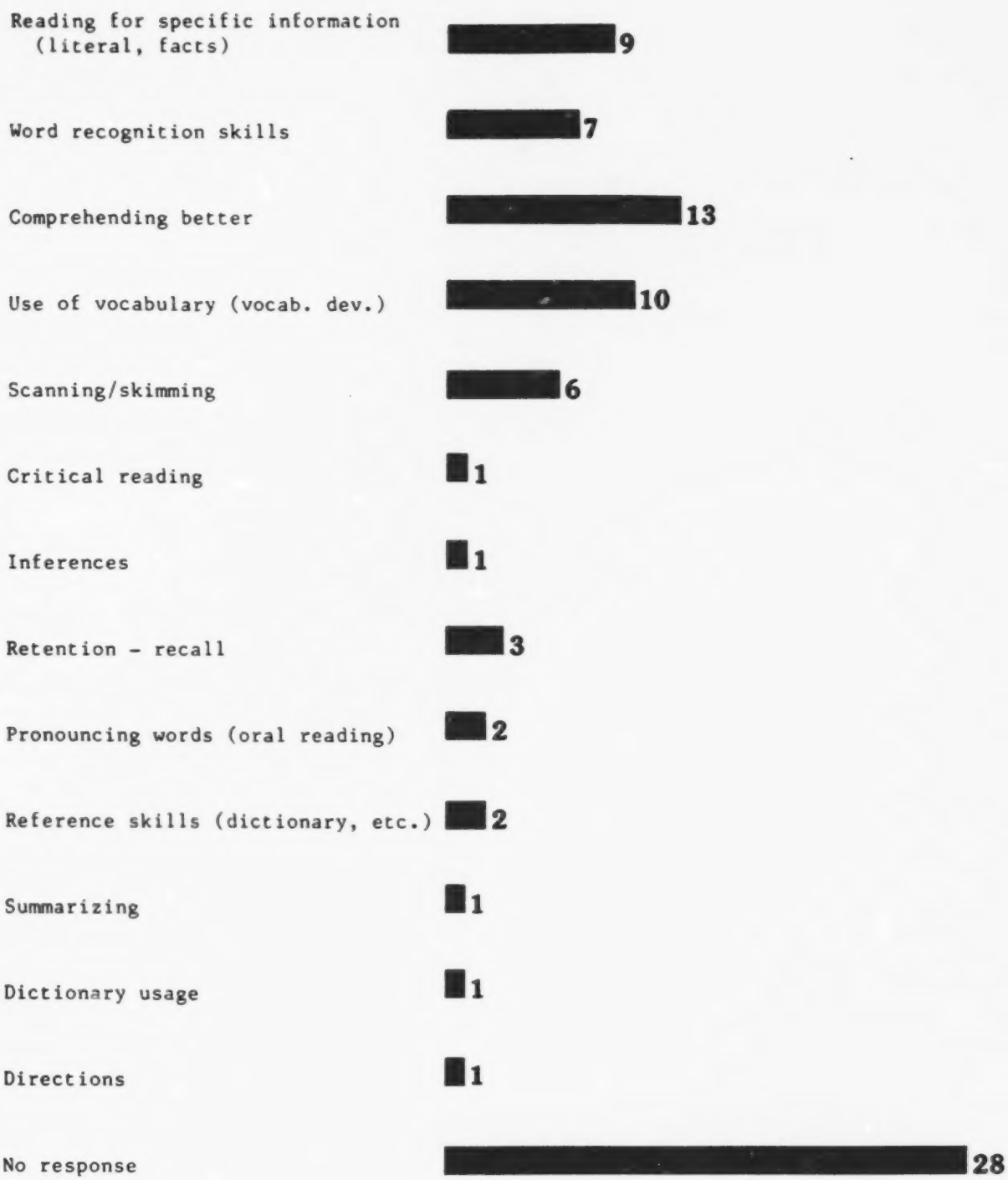
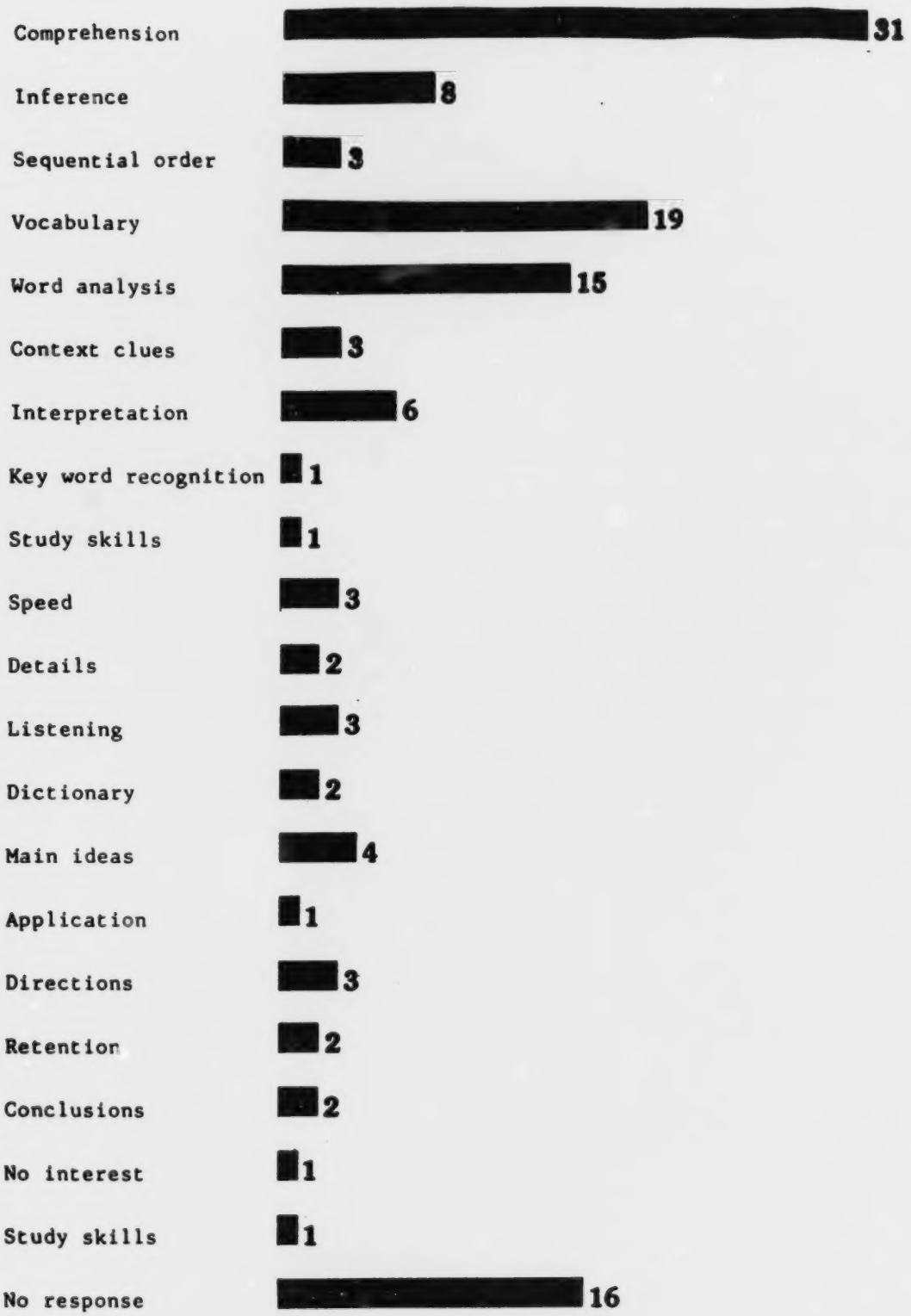


TABLE IV

Skills in Which Students are Most Deficient



In the last part of the survey, teachers were asked to mark YES or NO for six questions. Their responses follow:

		N
A.	Have you received instruction in the teaching of reading in your undergraduate college courses?	YES = 27 NO = 48 No response = 1
B.	Have you received such instruction in your graduate classes?	YES = 24 NO = 52
C.	Has such instruction been part of inservice training programs?	YES = 15 NO = 57 No response = 4
D.	Is there a reading program in your high school now?	YES = 37 NO = 27 No response = 12
E.	Is there a reading specialist in your high school?	YES = 21 NO = 43 No response = 12
F.	Is there a reading teacher in your high school?	YES = 36 NO = 29 No response = 11

Summary and Conclusions. A wide range of disciplines is represented in the sample. The largest number were in the field of English (N=22), ten taught mathematics, nine taught social studies and so on. The respondents believed that the skill of comprehension was the most important one for their students. Vocabulary was the second choice and word analysis ranked third. Thirty-seven per cent of the teachers

did not know which reading skills their students were best able to apply in their courses. Fifteen per cent believed that comprehension was the best skill students had. Thirteen per cent thought it was vocabulary and 12 per cent believed it to be reading for specific information. The greatest student reading deficiency was comprehension, then came vocabulary, and the third was word analysis. Twenty-one per cent of the teachers did not respond to this item.

Responses to the survey show that the teachers in the sample believed comprehension was most necessary for their students to succeed in their courses and it was also the skill in which students were most deficient. Next was vocabulary and the third was word analysis. It would appear that the reading skills most needed by students are those in which they are most deficient.

It is noteworthy that most of the teachers did not take an undergraduate reading course and most had not taken a graduate reading methods course. Moreover, reading instruction has not been a part of their inservice programs. From this, one can conclude that these teachers, as subject matter specialists, have had little formal training in the teaching of reading skills as a process for student subject matter mastery.

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